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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001011

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: AUTHORITIES OFFICIALLY DENY VENUE FOR OPPOSITION
CONFERENCE

REF: YEREVAN 1002

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Classified By: DCM Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.5 (B)(D)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) The Armenian Government has officially denied permission for Armenia's largest political opposition group to hold its December 21 party congress in a publicly-owned facility commonly used for such events. The Armenian National Congress (ANC), led by former President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP), is now scrambling to find another venue, so far unsuccessfully. The authorities decision sets a new precedent in their restrictions on freedom of assembly, and weakens the government's case -- both internationally and domestically -- that it intends to fulfill its commitments on democratization. End summary and comment.

THE OFFICIAL WORD IS "NO"

¶2. (SBU) As previewed in reftel, the authorities late on December 15 officially refused the request of Armenia's main opposition group to hold a planned party congress in a government-owned hall. The head of the government's press service stated publicly that the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff had notified the ANC in a December 12 phone call that the requested Government Sessions Hall would not be provided for the ANC's planned conference that it had hoped to hold December 19.

¶3. (C) In a subsequent interview with RFE/RL, ANC coordinator Levon Zurabian condemned the refusal as a "blatant violation of the law," and demanded the GOAM provide a written response to their request. Zurabian told RFE/RL that "The authorities are so terrified by a possible outburst of popular discontent that they fear making a conference hall available to the opposition." Zurabian told Emboff early on December 16 that the ANC still plans to hold the conference, and is discussing a possible alternative venue, including in neighboring Georgia.

ANC SEEKS ALTERNATE VENUE

¶4. (C) David Shahnazarian, a senior adviser to LTP, requested a meeting with the DCM late on December 16, where he appealed to the Embassy to "put pressure" on the authorities to reverse their decision. Shahnazarian also urged that the

embassy intercede on the ANC's behalf to secure an alternative venue -- at the American University of Armenia (AUA) in downtown Yerevan -- should the authorities stick to their refusal of the Government Sessions Hall. Shahnazarian said the refusal "makes no sense," and wondered out loud if the authorities were now scheming to force the opposition back into the streets.

15. (C) Shahnazarian said the ANC would not follow through with its threat to hold the conference in Tbilisi, primarily due to financial reasons, even though he had recently traveled there to scout out venues and make tentative reservations. But Shahnazarian added that come what may, the ANC would hold the conference on December 21. He also confirmed that LTP would personally address the gathering.

16. (C) Artak Zeynalian, executive board member of the Republic Party that is a prominent member of the 16-party ANC, told Emboff on December 16 that the party will now apply to all available halls in the capital -- theaters, sports and concert halls -- in order to hold the conference. He expects the Ministry of Culture to reject their requests for cultural venues. In that case, he said the party is prepared to file an official complaint with the Ministry of Justice, where political parties are registered and which, Zeynalian claims, is legally bound to prevent discrimination against registered political parties.

COMMENT

17. (C) Given the authorities' continuing crackdown on the LTP-led opposition, their refusal to provide a venue to the ANC for its conference is not altogether surprising. It

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establishes a new precedent, however, in restrictions on freedom of assembly. This is the first time in the post-election period that the public-owned Government Sessions Hall -- one of the traditional venues for political parties to hold their conclaves -- has been withheld. In fact, the ANC held its last party congress in the same hall in May 2008, when political tensions were running considerably higher than they are today. The refusal coincides with the beginning on December 19 of the high profile court case of seven LTP supporters detained in the wake of post-election violence, and a month before the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is to review, and is widely expected to assail, Armenia's lack of compliance with PACE resolutions. Against such a backdrop, this short-sighted refusal will further weaken the authorities' case -- both domestically and internationally -- that they intend to fulfill their oft-stated commitments on democratizaion. END COMMENT.
YOVANOVITCH